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ABSTRACT

This study of teacher education graduate follow-up surveys examined the relationship between response rate and number of graduates, questionnaire length, and follow-up contacts. Also, the study investigated survey practices differentiating between surveys which had high and low return rates in such areas as number of follow-up contacts, questionnaire length, the use of incentives (including summary of the results), type of return postage, deadline for responding, use of visible identification numbers, and personalization of address on the envelope (inside address, salutation, and signature). A 41-item Teacher Preparation Follow-Up Survey Questionnaire was constructed and sent to 333 colleges and universities with teacher education program in order to determine which techniques and practices were being used in follow-up surveys of graduates of teacher education programs. Spearman correlation coefficients showed significant relationship between response rate and number of attempts to contact the graduates. The number of questions on the questionnaire was not significantly related to response rate, and the relationship between number of graduates surveyed and response rate was marginal. Mann-Whitney tests between high and low response rate groups showed significant differences on the number of attempts and the number of graduates. Chi-square comparisons of institutions with high and low response rates showed significant differences on several variables related to personalization. (BAE)

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Teacher Education Follow-up Surveys:

Variables Related to Response Rate

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The purpose of the study was to attempt to examine the relationship between response rate and number of graduates, questionnaire length, and follow-up contacts. In addition, the study attempted to determine survey practices which differentiated between teacher education graduate follow-up surveys which had high and low return rates in such areas as number of follow-up contacts; questionnaire length; use of incentives (including a summary of the results); type of return postage; deadline for responding; use of visible identification numbers; and personalization of address on the envelope, inside address, salutation, and signature

The eternal search for the elusive secrets to high response rates in survey research has taken many directions. In addition to individual research studies, researchers have combined and compared results from several studies in attempts to find conclusions which have been supported consistently by high response rates (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984; Dillman, Dillman, & Makela, 1984; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978; Linsky, 1975; Scott, 1961; Yu & Cooper, 1983). The results have often been contradictory. There is consistent evidence that follow-up contacts and the use of incentives increase response rate. There is a small negative effect of questionnaire length on response rate. if the number of follow-up contacts and salience to respondents are controlled (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984). The use of first-class stamps on return envelopes and preliminary letters may increase returns but do not always do so. The effects of personalization are not clear, although Baumgartner and Heberlein concluded that, "It seems likely that anonymous procedures and personalization interact with other factors, such as the population surveyed, the topic of the survey, or the sponsor" (p. 71).

Researchers have recognized that the nature of the population being surveyed must be considered when selecting survey techniques (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984; Berdie, Anderson, & Niebuhr, 1986; Jones, 1979; Mason, Dressel, & Bain, 1961; Sudman, 1985) and have warned that it may be inappropriate to generalize the results of research carried out with a unique population to all populations. Sudman (1985) has suggested that the most effective procedures for surveying professionals may differ somewhat from those used in surveying general population samples Mail procedures may be particularly appropriate because they allow busy people to complete the questionnaires at their leisure, and the respondents are highly educated and have previous experience with forms and questionnaires. (Sudman & Bradburn, 1984). Anderson and Berdie (1975) demonstrated the differential effectiveness of various types of follow-up messages on university administrators, faculty members, graduate assistants, and

undergraduate students. Undergraduates were more likely to respond to hand-addressed postcard follow-ups than those with mailing labels, while the other groups responded similarly to the two types of addresses. There have been conflicting results regarding the stating of deadlines for responding when surveying members of a professional association (Baumgartner & Heberlein, 1984).

In meeting accreditation requirements of organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (ATE), colleges and universities with teacher-preparation programs are expected to evaluate their programs. The mail follow-up survey is the method most frequently employed to obtain evaluation information from graduates (Adams & Craig, 1983), although response rates have been found to range from 15% to 100% (Katz, Raths, Mohanty, Kurachi, & Irving, 1981).

Linsky (1985) and others have suggested procedures for conducting follow-up studies of teacher education graduates, but his comments were based primarily on general survey research rather than that which has been done in the specific area and with the population he was addressing. Probably the major reason for this is that much of the research in survey methodology has occurred in the areas of marketing and public opinion surveys. Considering the number of follow-up studies of graduates which are conducted each year by the over 400 colleges and universities with programs approved by NCATE and/or AACTE, relatively little has been done to determine the mail survey procedures which might be most successful with this particular population for obtaining program evaluation or employment information, which are two of the primary purposes of conducting follow-up surveys. The follow-up survey of graduates may be one of the most widely used and least researched applications of survey research methodology.

There are some conditions which are characteristic of teacher-education follow-up surveys. Questionnaires are sent to specific individuals. The members of the population are well educated. There is institutional sponsorship of the survey, and members of the population are highly familiar with the sponsor and probably have some type of feelings toward it. Many members of the population will have moved after graduation, so that mail will have to be forwarded from the graduate's college address or parents' home address. This type of activity is usually carried out on a low budget which precludes the use of incentives of a high monetary value. Some conditions, such as the

size of the program, location of the institution, extent to which subjects are drawn from local or distant locations, are not within the control of the researcher.

Few studies have been reported which were conducted in this context. Hogan (1985) compared return rates from junior college follow-up surveys during two consecutive years. The studies were conducted by 13 junior colleges During the first year, when survey procedures were not standardized, the response rate was only 35%. The following year, when three mailings were conducted at prescribed times, with a second copy of the questionnaire and return envelope being included in the third mailing, the response rate rose to 67%.

Cookingham (1985) found little difference in his follow-up survey of teacher-education graduates in return rates between those receiving personalized envelopes (the address typed directly onto the envelopes) and those whose envelopes were addressed with labels. Byrne (1986) received significantly more follow-up questionnaires from teacher education graduates after the initial mailing when a preliminary postcard had been sent than when no advance notification was sent. Researchers found inclusion of coupons to local firms only slightly improved the overall response rate in a follow-up of community college graduates (Stevenson, Walleri, & Japely, 1985).

Zusman and Duby (1984) received higher response rates from transfer students who had dropped out of a postsecondary education institution when a one dollar incentive was mailed with the questionnaire than when there was no incentive. The initial response rate (after the first mailing) was over twice as high for the incentive group (54%) as for the control group (22%). After a second mailing, the incentive group still had a higher overall response rate (64%) than the control group (45%) although there was no incentive included with the second mailing. Shale (1986) surveyed persons who had dropped out of home study courses. Students received either a formal or personalized letter, with or without an option to remove pre-coded personal data. Neither variable produced significant differences in response rates by itself, nor was there an interaction between variables.

Method

Instrument

A questionnaire was developed to determine the the extent to which techniques and practices found to be successful in some or most situations in previous research on survey methodology with other populations were being used in follow-up surveys of graduates of teacher-education programs. The questionnaire was pretested by

sending it for review to six individuals who had experience in teacher education follow-up studies. Three of the individuals were also knowledgeable in the area of survey research and were able to comment more extensively on instrument design. The instrument was refined based on comments received from the pretest and resulted in a 41-item, four-page instrument.

Procedures

In spring of 1986 a letter was sent to the dean/program chair of each teacher-preparation program which was approved by both NCATE and AACTE as noted in the AACTE membership directory (N=463). After explaining that research was planned regarding follow-up survey practices, the dean/chair was asked to return a postcard listing the name and address of the person responsible for the most recent follow-up study of persons completing the teacher-preparation program of that institution, or indicating that the institution did not conduct such studies on a regular basis. Follow-up telephone calls resulted in a 100% response rate to this initial investigation and produced a list of 333 institutions which were reported to conduct follow-up studies on a regular basis.

A cover letter, the 41-item Teacher Preparation Follow-up Survey Practices Questionnaire, and a postage-paid business-reply envelope were mailed to the person responsible for the graduate follow-up study at each of the 333 institutions. A business-reply envelope was used because the respondents were requested to attach copies of the questionnaires and letters used in their surveys, thus the amount of return postage could not be accurately predicted. Initial letters, questionnaires, and return envelopes were mailed in April. One follow-up letter and another copy of the questionnaire were mailed in May, approximately three weeks after the first mailing.

Subjects

Responses were received from a total of 248 of the 333 institutions to whom questionnaires were sent (74%). Representatives of six of the institutions wrote letters indicating that they did not think that their activities fit the scope of the survey and did not complete the questionnaires. An additional 16 questionnaires were received but deleted from all data analysis because responses on the questionnaires indicated that the institutions did not conduct graduate follow-up studies on a regular basis and were thus ineligible for consideration. This left usable data from 226 of a possible 311 eligible institutions, for a final response rate of 73%.

Institutions reported that from nine to 1,000 students (median=118) had completed their teacher-preparation programs during the preceding year. In conducting follow-up studies of graduates, 84% of the institutions surveyed

all graduates, with survey response rates varying from 10% to 100% (median =52%). The number of questions on the questionnaires ranged from three to 160 (median=27).

To test for nonresponse bias, telephone calls were placed in an attempt to obtain responses from 11 nonrespondents. Individuals at two institutions refused to participate. Responses to selected questions by the other nine nonrespondents indicated that the nonrespondents were not appreciably different from the respondents on key questions: median size of the nonrespondents' programs was 100 students; all nine attempted to survey all graduates; median response rate was 60%; and median number of questions on the questionnaire was 20.

Analysis

For those institutions surveying all students, Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated between response rate and: number of students completing the program the previous year, maximum number of attempts made in an effort to secure a response and number of questions on the questionnaire. Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare respondents with the highest (above 70%) and lowest (below 40%) response rates, using approximately 20% of the respondents in each of the extreme groups (n=42 in the high group, n=46 in the low group) on number of attempts, number of students, and number of questions on the questionnaire.

Chi-square comparisons were made between high and low groups on other selected variables: personalization in addressing the envelope, inside address, salutation, and signature; use of a preliminary letter of notification; offer or inclusion of incentive; offer of a summary; inclusion of a deadline for responding; type of return postage; and presence of visible identification numbers. On some variables, response categories were collapsed (when it was logical to do so) or deleted because expected frequencies were too low to meet conditions imposed by chi-square analysis.

Results

Spearman correlation coefficients showed a significant relationship between response rate and number of attempts to contact the graduate (r_S=.33, p<.001). The statistical significance of the relationship between number of graduates surveyed and response rate was marginal (r_S=-.16, p=.012), and the number of questions on the questionnaire was not significantly related to response rate (r_S=-.09, p=.10). Frequency distributions for these variables are shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Mann-Whitney tests between high and low response rate groups showed significant differences on the number of attempts (U=4289.5, z=-4.5380, p<.0001) and the number of graduates (U=570.5, z=-2.6399, p=.0083). The groups were not significantly different with respect to number of questions on the questionnaire (U=637.0, z=-1.7047, p=.0883). Institutions with high response rates had smaller numbers of graduates and made more attempts to contact them.

Chi-square comparisons of institutions with high and low response rates showed significant differences on several variables related to personalization. Institutions with high response rates were characterized by: addressing envelopes by typewriter rather than using labels (x^2=20.11, df=2, p<.0001), hand signing the letters (x^2=18.13, df=1, p<.0001), and typing the inside address onto the letter (x^2=13.57, df=1, p<.0005). Institutions with low response rates predominantly used a salutation of "Graduate" while high response surveys were more likely to use "Dear (first name)" or "Dear Mr/Ms (last name)" (x^2=18.63, df=2, p<.0005). Frequency distributions of responses to these items for high and low groups are shown in Table 5.

No differences were found for offeing to send a summary, including a deadline for responding, using stamps on return envelopes rather than business reply envelopes, and including a visible identification number. Chi-square tests were invalid for comparing groups on the use of a preliminary letter and inclusion or offer of an incentive due to low expected frequencies in both high and low groups employing these two techniques.

Discussion

It was not surprising that a strong relationship was found between response rate and the number of attempts made to reach the graduate. Follow-up contacts have repeatedly increased response rates in all settings. Since there is some evidence of a negative relationship between the number of graduates and response rate, an institution with a large number of graduates might be well advised to go to a sampling procedure that would reduce the number of graduates to be contacted. Less time and expense would be involved in the initial mailing, which could then be devoted to additional attempts to contact nonrespondents.

The lack of relationship between response rate and number of questions on the questionnaire is not totally unexpected. There was a wide variation in number of questions. Some surveys focused on employment and had relatively few questions, while others were directed topward program evaluation and were more lengthy. Research in other settings has produced mixed findings. Berdie, Anderson, and Niebuhr (1986) contend that it is the extent to

which a questionnaire has meaning to the respondent rather than its length which will determine whether or not an individual responds.

There does not appear to be an interaction between anonymity and personalization in follow-up surveys with this population. Addressing envelopes by typewriter rather than using labels, individually hand signing the letters, typing the inside address onto the letter, and greeting the graduate by first name or last name were more characteristic of institutions with high return rates than those with low return rates in this study although Cookingham (1985) found no difference between typing addresses on envelopes and using labels. Once again, however, each of these approaches requires an investiture of time on the part of the institution. Since institutions with high response rates had fewer graduates, they were better able to undertake such measures. It may also be that because the programs were smaller, the graduates had a more personal relationship with faculty members while attending the institution, leading to stronger feelings of loyalty to the institution and higher response rates. I nclusion of a visible identification number did not inhibit responses, just as Shale (1986) found that including an option to remove precoded personal information from the questionnaire had no effect on response rate.

Some variables had no apparent impact on response rate, thus the choice of using them can be made on other bases, such as time involved and cost. Offering to send a summary, stating a deadline for responding, and using first-class stamps on return envelopes do not appear to facilitate responses.

Implications

This study did not investigate the effect of the program itself on response rates, nor did it look at initial response rates (those achieved after only one mailing). It did not attempt to take into account all of the many variations in questionnaire and survey design which could be examined but did, instead, attempt to focus on factors on which considerable research has been completed in the past in other contexts.

Graduate follow-up surveys are carried out by large numbers of institutions each year across the nation, and knowledge which can improve the process should be of interest to people conducting them in view of the relatively low response rates which are sometimes reported and which cast doubt on the representativeness of the results. While the number of graduates is not under the control of the researcher, the number surveyed can be controlled through sampling.

This study is only a beginning in this area of research. Preliminary indications are that there are a multitude of variables intricately and inextricably intertwined, many of which are not within the control of the investigator. If anything, it is hoped that this study will serve as a stimulus to those in the field to plan and conduct their own experimental studies in the course of their graduate follow-up studies to verify or dispel these findings within the context of their own unique settings.

Although the value of follow-up contacts (which undoubtedly increase response rates) should not be minimized, it is important to monitor response rates after the first mailing and seek ways to increase the initial response rate, thus reducing the time and cost involved in subsequent mailings. Because respondents in this survey were not asked to report response rates following each contact, investigation of initial response rates can be examined only by limiting analysis to those institutions which made only one attempt to contact graduates. Future investigators should include examination of response rates following each contact to provide greater insight into the effectiveness of the procedures being used.

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Table 1

Response Rates

Rate	Institutions	
	n	%
10	3	1.4
12	1	0.5
15	3	1.4
18	1	0.5
20	4	1.9
25	3	1.4
28	3	1.4
30	14	6.5
33	3	1.4
34	1	0.5
35	3	1.4
38	7	3.3
40	14	6.5
42	1	0.5
45	5	2.3
46	1	0.5
48	3	1.4
49	1	0.5
50	33	15.3
51	1	0.5
52	3	1.4
55	6	2.8
57	1	0.5
58	1	0.5
60	20	9.3
62	1	0.5
63	1	0.5
64	1	0.5
65	12	5.6
67	1	0.5
68	1	0.5
70	20	9.3
72	1	0.5
74	1	0.5
65	9	4.2
76	1	0.5
68	1	0.5
80	12	5.6
85	4	1.9
90	6	2.8
92	1	0.5
93	1	0.5
95	2	0.9
97	2	0.9
100	1	0.5

Table 2

Maximum Number of Attempts to Contact Graduates

Attempts	Institutions n	%
One	78	34.4
Two	96	42.3
Three	40	17.6
Four	6	2.6
Five	5	2.2
No Response	2	0.9

Table 3

Frequency Distribution of Number of Students
Completing Program the Previous Year

Students	Institutions	
	n	%
9	1	0.5
10	1	0.5
11	1	0.5
12	2	1.0
15	1	0.5
20	2	1.0
23	1	0.5
25	4	2.0
27	3	1.5
30	5	2.5
31	1	0.5
34	2	1.0
35	4	2.0
37	1	0.5
40	10	4.9
41	1	0.5
43	1	0.5
45	1	0.5
47	1	0.5
50	7	3.4
52	1	0.5
55	3	1.5
60	7	3.4
65	3	1.5
66	1	0.5
67	1	0.5
68	1	0.5
69	1	0.5
70	1	0.5
74	1	0.5
75	3	1.5
80	6	2.9
81	1	0.5
89	1	0.5
90	2	1.0
97	1	0.5
98	1	0.5
100	10	4.9
101	1	0.5
105	2	1.0
108	1	0.5
110	1	0.5
111	1	0.5
118	1	0.5
120	1	0.5
125	6	2.9
130	1	0.5
140	2	1.0

Students	Institutions	
	n	%
150	8	3.9
152	1	0.5
153	1	0.5
160	2	1.0
165	1	0.5
167	1	0.5
170	1	0.5
176	1	0.5
180	1	0.5
185	1	0.5
186	1	0.5
190	1	0.5
200	11	5.5
203	1	0.5
210	1	0.5
220	1	0.5
225	1	0.5
230	1	0.5
231	1	0.5
240	1	0.5
242	1	0.5
250	3	1.5
260	2	1.0
270	1	0.5
275	1	0.5
280	1	0.5
288	1	0.5
300	9	4.4
310	1	0.5
342	1	0.5
350	2	1.0
357	1	0.5
362	1	0.5
380	1	0.5
390	1	0.5
400	7	3.4
425	1	0.5
437	1	0.5
439	1	0.5
440	2	1.0
450	2	1.0
500	4	2.0
600	2	1.0
650	1	0.5
700	3	1.5
725	1	0.5
735	1	0.5
1000	1	0.5

Table 4

Number of Questions on the Questionnaires

Question	Institutions n	%
3	1	0 5
5	3	1.5
6	1	0.5
7	1	0.5
8	3	1.5
9	2	1.0
10	10	4.9
11	3	1.5
12	10	4.9
13	4	2.0
14	1	0.5
15	9	4.4
16	1	0.5
17	7	3.4
18	7	3.4
19	2	1.0
20	11	5.4
21	3	1.5
22	5	2.5
23	6	3.0
24	2	1.0
25	9	4.4
28	3	1.5
29	1	0.5
30	20	9.9
31	1	0.5
32	2	1.0
33	6	3.0
34	2	1.0
35	5	2.5
36	2	1.0
37	1	0.5
38	2	1.0
40	8	3.5
41	1	0.5
42	1	0.5
43	1	0.5
44	1	0.5
45	4	2.0
46	2	1.0
48	2	1.0
50	7	3.4
51	2	1.0
55	2	1,0
60	7	3.4
62	1	0.5
63	4	2.0
65	2	1.0
66	1	0.5
70	4	2.0
75	2	1.0
80	1	0.5
93	1	0.5
100	1	0.5
150	1	0.5
160	1	0.5

Table 5

Responses to Questions by Low and High Response Groups

Question	Group Low	Group High
What is the maximum number of attempts (mailings, telephone or personal calls) made to a graduate in an attempt to secure a response?		
One	27	8
Two	14	15
Three	3	19
How are the envelopes/postcards addressed?		
By typewriter directly onto the envelope	4	20
By labels on which the addresses are typed	14	4
By labels generated from a computer file	23	11
What type of greeting is used on the letters/postcards?		
Dear (first name)	3	13
Dear Mr. or Ms. (last name)	5	7
Graduate	28	7
Other	5	6
How are the letters/postcards signed?		
Individually signed in blue or black ink	5	23
Stamped with the signature or not individually signed (signature duplicated when letter is duplicated)	33	13
What type of postage is used on the return envelope?		
Self-addressed postage-paid business reply envelope	34	25
Self-addressed envelope with first-class stamp or first-class commemorative stamp	7	11
Is the inside address typed onto the letter to the graduate?		
Yes	13	29
No	29	10
Is your first attempt a preliminary notification about the survey which does not include a copy of the questions to be asked?		
Yes	1	5
No	45	37
Do you send or offer to send a summary of the results to those who respond?		
Yes	5	7
No	40	35
Do you offer or include any other incentives for responding?		
Yes	3	4
No	42	37
Do you indicate a deadline for responding?		
Yes	27	21
No	17	18
Is there a visible identification number on the questionnaire or return envelope when it is sent?		
Yes	8	12
No	36	27